

# The state and the alcohol industry in Western Australia

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In 1984 in Western Australia (WA) we saw the publication of the reports from two official inquiries into the alcohol industry. Such an event is unusual in this state and is the reason for this article. One report was released in May 1984 by the Select Committee Appointed to Inquire Into Alcohol and Other Drugs and was chaired by Gordon Hill, MLA, while the other report released one month later was that of the Honorary Royal Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Liquor Laws, chaired by Judge Syme, chairman of the Licensing Court.

The Hill report was concerned with that subset of alcohol consumers characterised as being a social problem, whilst the Syme report was focussed on the formal regulatory mechanisms involving the sociocultural context of alcohol consumption. The former report is in one sense only distinguishable from the latter by its desire to augment and expand the range of the informal agencies of social control, ie the usual range of health and welfare agencies.

Another concern is both reports are written from a perspective of oversight of the state's performance as being like a corporate manager and therefore is largely concerned with social ends like efficiency, competitiveness and rationalisation of the economy. The more significant report is the Syme report because of the potential long term impact the recommended changes in liquor laws are likely to have on the incidence of alcohol-related problems, as it will facilitate the increased consumption of alcohol.

The pertinent prior historical starting point for the Syme report, which is the major concern of this article, is the consequences of an earlier committee on the operation of liquor laws in WA, which reported in 1969. In spite of the 1969 report by Phillip Adams QC being a slim and concise document, it precipitated substantial and significant changes in the regulatory framework, such as the reduction of the legal minimum drinking age to 18, introduction of Sunday hotel trading hours in the metropolitan area, etc.

It could be argued that the consequences of the changes from the 1969 inquiry was really what was under investigation by the Syme inquiry 15 years later. As observed in the Adams report liquor laws historically in WA have had two objects: (a) to raise revenue and (b) to prevent drunkenness. To justify a relaxation( 'liberalisation') in the liquor laws the 1969 Inquiry had to resort to a model that purported to explain the existence of problematic alcohol use in the community. We find at page 13 of the report such a proposition:

*'It is well known that alcoholism is now accepted as a disease and is, therefore, a medical problem. ... We are in no doubt whatever that with some people the drinking of alcohol even in a social way can result in alcoholism.'*

It seemed to be a simple matter to turn this into an implicit underpinning of alcohol policy, as the Syme inquiry stated *'in our opinion, no limitation of liquor outlets or the hours during which liquor may be sold would make any significant contribution to the problem.'*(p. 13)

There are a surfeit of studies which refute such a proposition, which demonstrate that the relative availability of alcohol, such as, hours of trading, minimum legal drinking age and number and type of retail outlets, is a fundamental determinant of the incidence of alcohol-related problems, measured on a variety of health and social indices.

The Ledermann model of per capita alcohol consumption has been widely regarded as accounting for the incidence of the consequences of increased rates of alcohol use compared to jurisdictions with lower rates. The model shows through a log-normal distribution curve that as

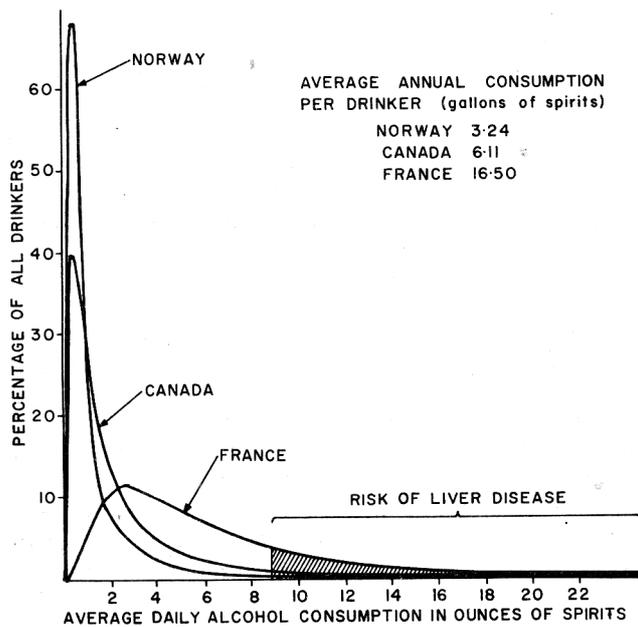
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<sup>1</sup> Based on an article published in *Social Work News*, March-April 1985.

per capita alcohol use increase, so will the proportion of the alcohol using population who become problematic users. This is demonstrated in Figure 1, which compares the distribution curves for alcohol use in Norway, Canada and France, which in 1968, had an average annual per capita consumption of 3.24, 6.11 and 16.50 gallons of spirits, respectively. Figure 1 shows that the

*'higher the average per capita intake, the more the distribution curve shifts towards the high intake end of the scale. The hatched area indicates the levels of intake associated with proven risk of liver disease.'* (Kalant & Kalant 1972: 104)

**Figure 1: Average daily alcohol consumption (ounces of spirits): Norway, Canada & France, 1968**



There is a suspicion the state was propelled into enacting changes in the liquor laws in 1969 to some degree by pressure from the alcohol industry. Now, some 15 years later, it appears to be very difficult to reverse the effects of the changes that flowed from the Adams report, even though they may be quite harmful. For instance, the deleterious consequences of Sunday hotel trading has been well documented by significant increases in the number of traffic accidents. Compared to the situation in WA, in the United States there appears to have been a more successful attempt to reduce the incidence of alcohol related road deaths by increasing the minimum legal drinking age.

The hotel sector of the alcohol industry has been adversely affected by a shift towards a pattern in WA of purchasing packaged beer from liquor stores for home consumption and away from consumption at hotels. The hotel sector is of course a large employer of labour and in times of high unemployment is able to evoke concern that its profitability has been infringed. Thus in 1979 an inquiry was conducted by the Bureau of Consumer Affairs into the retail prices of beer in WA, the Lehane inquiry, to examine the options for changes in the liquor licensing laws.

By the time of the most recent inquiry in 1984 (the Syme report) it would appear that the hotel industry has become more profitable. It has resorted to a number of marketing strategies aimed at increasing the volume of alcohol sales, such as live bands and other forms of entertainment.

The most notorious strategy has been the extensive use of scantily dressed women working as either as barmaids, hostesses or participating in lingerie shows held at licensed premises.

We should not be surprised that the Syme inquiry was restricted to considering a range of economic issues by its terms of reference, as its purpose was not to question the extent of alcohol use in the community or to establish more socially desirable modes of consumption, but to ensure the economic health of a significant sector of the WA economy.

An interesting recommendation of the Syme inquiry was to establish a Liquor Commission to have a supervisory role of the activities of licence holders, as well as perform other administrative activities, such as the granting of special permits and authorising variations to the operation and layout of licensed premises. This would mean Licensing Court would act as an appeal body from the Liquor Commission's decisions.

We will have to wait and see if the Liquor Commission will be established on the basis recommended. The four member Commission could be a step towards broadening the basis of input into more rigorously scrutinising an industry which has historically eschewed its social responsibilities. It was for this reason that the Syme inquiry suggested one member of the Commission be selected from a panel of names submitted by the WA Alcohol and Drug Authority.

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